

Statement for the Record
Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

“Countering China’s Malign Influence Operations in the United States”

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Chairman Warner, Vice Chairman Rubio, and distinguished members of the committee, it is a pleasure to appear before you today. In 2018, the Hoover Institution and the Asia Society jointly released a seminal study, *China’s Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*, which for many was an eye opener into China’s influence operations across the United States.¹ Building on that foundation, in 2020 Hoover launched its project on China’s Global Sharp Power (CGSP), which I co-chair. CGSP produces data-driven analysis and policy recommendations on China with an emphasis on research security, critical technologies, and malign foreign influence. Influence operations at the subnational level are a special focus.

Since its origins as a hunted revolutionary insurgency, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently sought to render the world outside of itself more tractable and compliant. Influence operations have been integral to its dominion over China’s complex society, and today they loom especially large outside of the country, where the CCP’s capacity to project violence is constrained. These operations encounter few obstacles in the permissive, lightly policed societies characteristic of liberal democracies, where they aim to coopt, corrupt, and coerce local actors into advancing party objectives. Frequently, their targets are unaware or comparatively unconcerned that they are participating in a grand design orchestrated by the CCP because they are focused instead on the short-term transactional logic of their relationship with a Chinese partner.

CCP influence operations employ a mixture of carrots and sticks, alternately covert, subtle, and brazen to capitalize on the idealism, avarice, and instincts for self-preservation of their quarries. While those that violate law are subject to existing enforcement actions, a great many CCP influence operations in the US inhabit lawful zones of protected speech and association that can be difficult for legal tools to reach, particularly when US citizens are involved in their execution. Some unfold slowly or diffusely to create good will and dependency relationships ripe for later

¹ Larry Diamond and Orville Schell eds., *China’s Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2018), https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/diamond-schell_chineseinfluence_oct2020rev.pdf.

exploitation. Influence operations qualify as malign if they obfuscate their origins, funding sources, and agenda; trade in disinformation or misdirection that degrades discourse; or advocate violations of law, fundamental rights, or democratic principles.² Lawful but malign operations are among the most challenging to combat in democratic societies because they test our liberties and commitments to due process and nondiscrimination.

The CCP explicitly rejects the liberal democratic conception that civil society should be autonomous from the state.³ In principle, it reserves the right to insinuate itself in a supervisory or leadership capacity everywhere in China to ensure that all play their part in its projects and remain aligned with its priorities, and none develop the independent resources, prestige, and organizational capacity to challenge its supremacy. The CCP aims, in the words of the PRC Constitution, to “unite all forces that can be united” while neutralizing active and potential sources of resistance.⁴ Its foreign influence operations originate in the logic of this “united front” and the domestic institutions and practices that support it.

The United Front Work Department (UFWD), an organ of the party’s central committee, holds the lion’s share of the influence operation portfolio. UFWD personnel are found at every major level of party administration in China and, more importantly, all party members are bound to support the mission of the united front no matter where they serve. Under Xi, the UFWD has experienced a renaissance, greatly expanding its workforce, budget, and responsibilities. While most of its effort reflects domestic priorities, it oversees thousands of organizations that operate in academic, charitable, commercial, cultural, ethnic, and religious affairs, many of which also engage with foreign partners or have an international footprint. Regulations adopted in 2020 require these organizations to observe party leadership in their united front work and many have party cells embedded in their governance.⁵ Examples include nominally independent chambers of commerce and federations of industry and commerce, which court international business, and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会), which promotes people-to-people diplomacy and manages sister city relations.⁶ The zeal with which these organizations execute party mandates varies to be sure,

² Kamya Yadav et al., *What Makes an Influence Operation Malign*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 7, 2023, available at

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/What_Makes_An_Influence_Operation_Malign.pdf.

³ “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” *ChinaFile*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

⁴ Preamble, Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, amended March 11, 2018.

http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html

⁵ Regulations on the Work of the CCP United Front Work Department 中国共产党统一战线工作条例, promulgated December 21, 2020, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-01/05/content_5577289.htm.

⁶ Gerry Groot, Understanding the Role of Chambers of Commerce and Industry Associations in United Front Work,” *China Brief*, 18(11), June 19, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/understanding-the-role-of-chambers-of-commerce-and-industry-associations-in-united-front-work/>.

but the principle that the party leads all remains, and under Xi Jinping it is exercising that option ever more intrusively.⁷

Much of the foreign-facing work of the UFDW concerns Taiwan and the multi-ethnic Chinese diaspora, which the CCP treats as emanations of its domestic polity. For instance, associations for the promotion of peaceful unification (和平统一促进会) are found throughout the world, where they amplify PRC policy on Taiwan and Tibet and seek to limit international engagements with the island to the PRC's terms. In 2020, the US State Department designated the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification as a foreign mission, calling it a front organization for the UFDW. The Western Returned Scholars Association (欧美同学会/中国留学人员联谊会) ties together ethnic Chinese businesspeople and scholars working abroad. In addition to conventional networking activities, it has supported talent program recruitment and illicit technology transfer.⁸ The Chinese Overseas Friendship Association (中华海外联谊会) monitors and purports to speak for Chinese abroad. In January 2022, one of its leaders in London triggered a MI5 security service interference alert to the UK Parliament based on intelligence that she was using UFDW money to cultivate rising politicians.⁹ In August of the same year, Beijing mobilized overseas friendship associations from twenty-two countries to issue coordinated protests against US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.¹⁰

Evidence suggests that the tightening political climate in China is fueling transnational repression, ostracism, and intimidation of diaspora communities abroad. Reports of cross-border harassment, surveillance, assault, and even abduction against activists and students are rising.¹¹ The indirect cases are the hardest to combat. In 2023, a pro-Beijing newspaper in Hong Kong vituperatively labeled a local professor an "agent of the West" for accepting a fellowship in the US funded by the "invisible hand" of the US Congress.¹² She was openly watched in the US

⁷ Matthew Johnson, *The CCP Absorbs China's Private Sector: Capitalism with Party Characteristics* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2023),

https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/Hvr_JohnsonEssay_CPP_web.pdf.

⁸ Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, *Uncovering China's Influence in Europe: How Friendship Groups Coopt European Elites*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020,

[https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8225_\(Uncovering_Chinas_Influence_Report\)_FINAL.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8225_(Uncovering_Chinas_Influence_Report)_FINAL.pdf); Takashi Suzuki, "China's United Front Work in the Xi Jinping Era – Institutional Developments and Activities," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 8:1 (2019), 83-98.

⁹ Gordon Corera, "Why Did MI5 Name Christine Lee as an 'Agent of Influence'," *BBC*, July 19, 2022,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-62179004>.

¹⁰ "Friendship organizations and people from many countries condemn Pelosi's visit to China's Taiwan region and express firm support for the one-China principle 多国友好组织和人士谴责佩洛西窜访中国台湾地区 表示坚定支持一个中国原则," *People's Daily* 人民日报, August 9, 2022, p. 3

¹¹ "Silenced Voices, Hidden Struggles: PRC Transnational Repression on Overseas Human Rights Activists," DoubleThink Labs, 2023, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oIZOWYiHniv3TQ6pJgLKqTKrSAqNkLv/view>; Serena Roy, "The Threat of Transnational Repression from China and the U.S. Response," *Testimony to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China*, June 15, 2022,

https://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/documents/DHS%20Testimony_Chinese%20Repression%20-%20CECC%20JUN15%20-FINAL%20Transmitted%20to%20CECC_0.pdf.

¹² "China Must Remove 'Academic Villains' Who Oppose China and Disrupt Hong Kong 文汇报-中国须清除反中乱港'学棍'," *Wen Wei Po* 文汇报, February 28, 2023, A12.

to frighten her, but in ways that preserved plausible deniability, and did not return to Hong Kong for her own safety. PRC authorities or their proxies also arrange phone calls between their targets and family members still in China who under duress urge their loved ones to abandon their activities in the US and return home. Social and professional organizations and Chinese-language media in overseas markets channel such pressure with a potency that few outside of the affected communities appreciate.¹³ In Canada, at least a half-dozen former or current politicians, some of them ethnic Chinese, have reportedly been attacked in influence operations orchestrated by Beijing.¹⁴ But because these operations typically present as ordinary politicking or transpire in private social media groups voiced by surrogates, establishing violations of law or clear attribution to the CCP can be difficult.

In 2015, Xi Jinping re-established an interagency leading small group to guide implementation of united front work across the party and state bureaucracies, and the UFWD by no means monopolizes the field.¹⁵ Many other organs play vital roles in malign foreign influence operations, such as the propaganda department of the central committee, which oversees China's state media and publishing outlets. These outlets disseminate state narratives in multiple language around the globe through official channels and a network of proxy sites. They have been central to the information war over the COVID pandemic, state repression in Xinjiang, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Chinese state media employees are inauthentically posing as trusted, independent social media influencers on major Western social media platforms, where they promote slickly produced party propaganda and lifestyle content that rebut foreign criticisms of China and portray it positively.¹⁶ The US anti-war group Code Pink, which disrupted a February 2023 hearing of the House Select Committee on the CCP, has taken up the same mission, launching a "China is Not Our Enemy" campaign that traces back to a global web of shell companies and the wealthy husband of the group's founder, who collaborates closely with the CCP propaganda department.¹⁷

PRC influence operations on Western social media are growing bolder. They are promoting a litany of Chinese government reports that document flaws in American democracy as part of a global campaign to showcase China's political system as superior and have started using generative AI to create appealing visual content that results in higher social media engagement. These developments portend concerted interference in the 2024 US elections and as a

¹³ "Sophistication, Scope, and Scale: Digital Threats from East Asia Increase in Breadth and Effectiveness," *Microsoft Threat Intelligence*, September 2023, <https://query.prod.cms.rt.microsoft.com/cms/api/am/binary/RW1aFyW>.

¹⁴ Norimitsu Onishi, "Canadian Politicians Who Criticize China Become Its Targets," *New York Times*, July 15, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/world/americas/canada-china-election-interference.html>.

¹⁵ "China's Influence Operations Bureaucracy," in Diamond and Schell, *China's Influence & American Interests*, 2018, 151-162, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/16_diamond-schell-chinas-influence-and-american-interests_appendix-1-_chinese-influence-operations-bureaucracy.pdf.

¹⁶ "Chinese State Media's Global Influencer Operation," *Digital Threat Analysis Center*, January 31, 2022, <https://miburo.substack.com/p/csm-influencer-ops-1>; "Chinese State Media's Global Influencer Operation: Why It Matters," *Digital Threat Analysis Center*, February 10, 2022, <https://miburo.substack.com/p/chinese-state-medias-global-influencer>.

¹⁷ Alexander Reid Ross and Courtney Dobson, "The Big Business of Uyghur Genocide Denial," *New Lines Magazine*, January 18, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-big-business-of-uyghur-genocide-denial/>.

preparatory step, in the runup to the preceding midterm election, the campaigns began impersonating American voters.¹⁸

The Ministry of State Security (国家安全部) and the International Liaison Department of the CCP central committee (中国共产党中央委员会对外联络部) run obfuscated influence operations directed at US elites at the national and subnational levels and seek to identify and cultivate rising stars.¹⁹ The MSS has long fed operatives posing as academic or policy insiders to American media, scholars, and government analysts to influence how China is understood and spoken about in the US, most notoriously through the China Reform Forum, a research institution under the central party school, and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, 中国现代化国际联系研究院), a leading think tank.²⁰

Experienced China watchers engage with these institutions knowing them for what they are, but danger lurks when the untempered credulously soak up their talking points. Particularly in Xi Jinping's China, where critical, independent voices have grown circumspect or silent, the pundits who still speak volubly and the institutions that host them must be assessed with care.

The Center for China and Globalization (CCG), another leading Beijing think tank, is a case in point. Wang Huiyao (王辉耀), its globe-trotting founder, is a fixture on the US and international conference circuits. In 2019, Senator Rubio drew attention to the fact that a prominent Washington think tank did not list Wang's high-level affiliations with the UFWF when it invited him to speak.²¹ But this airing of his ties has hardly slowed Wang down. In 2021, Wang and CCG president Mabel Miao (苗绿) published a book, *I Talk to the World About China* (我向世界说中国), that distills lessons from a litany of international media and track two engagements, such as the Munich Security Conference, the Davos Forum, and the Mink Debate on "how to create new narrative methods and models" about China.²² In the months since China's COVID lockdown ended, Wang has capitalized on the hunger to restore in-person lines of communication by resuming his role interpreting China for audiences around the world and hosting a parade of Americans visiting Beijing.

¹⁸ "Sophistication, Scope, and Scale: Digital Threats from East Asia Increase in Breadth and Effectiveness," *Microsoft Threat Intelligence*, September 2023, <https://query.prod.cms.rt.microsoft.com/cms/api/am/binary/RW1aFyW>.

¹⁹ Alex Joske, "The Party Speaks for You: Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, Report 32/2020 (2020), https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2020-06/The%20party%20speaks%20for%20you_0.pdf?VersionId=gFHuXyYMR0XuDQOs.6JSmrDyk7MralcN; David Shambaugh, "China's 'Quiet Diplomacy': The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party," *China: An International Journal*, 5:1 (2007), 26-54; "China's Influence Operations Bureaucracy," 161-162.

²⁰ David Shambaugh, "China's International Relations Think Tanks: Evolving Structure and Process," *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002), 575-596; "Profile of MSS-Affiliated PRC Foreign Policy Think Tank CICIR," *Open Source Center*, August 25, 2011, <https://irp.fas.org/dni/osc/cicir.pdf>.

²¹ "Letter of Marco Rubio to Congresswoman Jane Harman, President and CEO of Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars," May 4, 2018, <https://ia903106.us.archive.org/0/items/5776350-Rubioletter/5776350-Rubioletter.pdf>.

²² "I Speak China to the World 我向世界说中国," *Center for China and Globalization*, July 2021, <http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/64531>.

Figures like Wang offer foreign journalists, scholars, and analysts another sought after commodity: the trophy of access. Access to the party's anointed unofficial spokespeople is a currency that affirms self-esteem, burnishes one's standing among peers, and indicates that one has professionally arrived. One earns and maintains access by picking one's words and projects carefully to steer clear of the party's red lines. United front work encourages this cult of access as a form of invisible social control; access rewards and reinforces positive behavior just as visa denial disincentivizes the negative. Losing it can interrupt research, knock one off the fast track, and set back a career.

In July 2022, the National Counterintelligence and Security Center issued an unclassified bulletin that helpfully summarizes PRC influence operations targeting government and business leaders at the US subnational level.²³ Elected officials at the state and local levels typically lack the expertise on China's political system and its malign influence operations to meet prospective partners from the PRC on a level playing field. They are understandably more attentive to the immediate concerns of their constituents rather than matters of geostrategic competition and are stretched thin. Only four states have full time legislatures with large, well-paid staffs.²⁴ Consequently, they present a far softer environment for malign influence operations than their counterparts at the federal level, and they are utterly outgunned by the resources the PRC devotes to studying and cultivating them.

A 2019 report issued by D&C Think, a Beijing-based think tank, and the Tsinghua University Globalization Research Center surveyed the attitude of US governors towards China and determined: "17 governors are friendly to China, 14 governors have an ambiguous attitude towards China, 6 governors are tough on China, and 14 governors have no obvious and open stance on China." Noting opportunities to forge connections free of Washington's gaze, the report provided a detailed breakdown of state per capita GDP and trade statistics and asserted that the "constitution prohibits the (US) president from interfering in the affairs of the governors of each state. The governor does not need to worry about the affairs of the federal government."²⁵

The mismatch in capacity was evident in a 2006 memorandum to the sister city agreement between Irvine, California and Xuhui district in Shanghai, in which Irvine promised in language that was surely supplied by the Chinese side not to send official delegations to Taiwan, not to fly the Taiwanese flag and not to play the Taiwanese national anthem or attend Taiwan National Day celebrations. It also stipulated that Irvine recognizes "that there is only one China." After news of the memorandum provoked an uproar in the local Taiwanese community, it was

²³ "Safeguarding Our Future: Protecting Government and Business Leaders at the U.S. State and Local Level from People's Republic of China (PRC) Influence Operations," *National Counterintelligence and Security Center*, July 2022, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/SafeguardingOurFuture/PRC_Subnational_Influence-06-July-2022.pdf.

²⁴ "Part and Full-time Legislatures," National Conference of State Legislatures, July 28, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/full-and-part-time-legislatures>.

²⁵ "Panoramic View of the US Attitude Towards China: Governors 美国对华态度全景 - 州长篇," *Minzhi Research Institute*, June 22, 2019, reposted at https://chinatechthreat.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CTT-Mandarin-Comparison_final.pdf.

rescinded.²⁶ Similarly, in 2019, staff from the PRC embassy in Washington pressured the city of Rockville, Maryland to abandon plans to sign a sister city relationship with Yilan, Taiwan, in part citing a 2009 agreement between Rockville and the PRC city of Jiaying as adverse precedent.²⁷ In this instance, the city stood firm.

The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会), a UFWD-affiliated organ, stood behind both cases. The CPAFFC promotes people-to-people diplomacy and manages sister city relations in coordination with PRC diplomats and party policy. Since 2011, it has also sponsored the China-US Governors Forum. In 2020, the US State Department withdrew from the formal agreement supporting this forum after the previous year's iteration was billed undisguisedly as a deal-making opportunity rather than as a setting for intergovernmental dialogue.

Economics figures prominently in the debate over China's influence operations in the US. For instance, in 2021, the PRC embassy in Washington caused a stir by lobbying US executives and business groups to oppose draft legislation before Congress on trade and human rights.²⁸ But such overt displays are unnecessary in sectors where the commercial interests of US firms already overlap with the PRC's strategic objectives, as perhaps in banking and semiconductors, and the firms themselves echo CCP talking points on their own initiative. This is the state that united front work aims to create.

At the same time, conditions are changing. This year, investment into the US from China has fallen to the lowest level since 2009 owing to the collapse in travel between the two nations, rising tensions, stricter regulatory reviews, and China's slowing economy.²⁹ In certain areas, such as battery technology and land sales, this retrenchment may be going too far.

Chinese battery companies lead the world and are inking deals to supply top international automakers. But political opposition to using Chinese technology in the US for fear of foreign interference and supply chain dependence threatens to undermine the competitiveness of major American automakers on the global market, hold back their transition to new energy vehicles, and make catching up and leaping ahead harder to do. The US should humbly take a page from the united front playbook by turning China's strengths in this area to our advantage. US states and localities should also renounce blanket, discriminatory restrictions on residential

²⁶ "Sister-City Pact puts Irvine in Bad Spot," *Los Angeles Daily News*, June 21, 2006, <https://www.dailynews.com/2006/06/21/sister-city-pact-puts-irvine-in-bad-spot/>.

²⁷ Sarah Newland, "Paradiplomacy as a Response to International Isolation: The Case of Taiwan," *The Pacific Review*, 36:4 (2023), 784-812, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2025889>.

²⁸ Michael Martina, "Chinese Embassy Lobbies U.S. Business to Oppose China Bills – Sources," *Reuters*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/exclusive-chinese-embassy-lobbies-us-business-oppose-china-bills-sources-2021-11-12/>.

²⁹ "China Shows Signs of Decoupling from US as FDI, Trade Falls," Rhodium Group, September 7, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-07/china-fdi-into-us-plunges-to-more-than-decade-low-rhodium-says>.

land purchases that infringe on constitutional rights, stoke xenophobic sentiments, and derogate the democracy we seek to protect.

Recommendations:

A century ago, Sun Yat-sen famously compared the Chinese people to a sheet of loose sand, but today that metaphor may more aptly describe the United States. The CCP is disciplined and purposeful. It sees the openness, decentralization, and pluralism that make American democracy vibrant as vulnerabilities to exploit, and we face daunting coordination problems and tradeoffs in forging responses. Parochial interests dissipate our resolve, and federalism fractures governmental capacity, leaving a house divided. Legislative fixes will inevitably impose costs, and these must be weighed carefully and kept proportionate. They must not compromise cherished liberties or harm those who bear the brunt of CCP repression most, the multi-ethnic Chinese diaspora. With those points in mind, I urge the committee to consider the following recommendations.

1. Increase funding for open-source research and publication on malign foreign influence operations. Although US law enforcement and the intelligence community track PRC influence operations, they have significant resource constraints and restrictions on their authorities, and their ability to release information into the public record is limited by the need to protect investigations, sources, and methods. Important segments of American society may also lack trust in their statements. Non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and academic researchers are well-positioned to overcome these obstacles and must expand their roles in raising awareness of malign foreign influence operations, exposing their evolving goals and mechanics, and mobilizing resistance.
2. Provide integrated federal support to subnational governments and business. Hardening US society against malign foreign influence and empowering subnational actors to safeguard the integrity of their domains requires unifying disparate federal resources. Create integrated client-facing touch points that can provide interagency guidance in domains such as paradiplomacy and commercial activity. These could be housed in DHS fusion centers and Commerce's commercial service offices around the United States. Produce fact sheets for commonly encountered situations, such as controversies over sister-city relationships and PRC attempts to muddle the distinctions between official US policy towards Taiwan and China's one China principle.
3. Look beyond espionage and law enforcement. Malign foreign influence operations run the gamut of lawful and illicit activities, and many of the most impactful may lie within zones of protected speech and association where government authority is constrained. Combatting these requires strategies that borrow from public health as much as from law and counterintelligence. Government can break through collective action problems in civil society by creating public infrastructure for trainings, transparency initiatives,

information sharing, and best practices. It should facilitate and enable desirable conduct rather than simply proscribe the undesirable.

4. Address systemic as well as acute risk. Incident reports and case studies provide data for characterizing the threat posed by malign foreign influence operations and concrete reference points for tailoring solutions. But one must remain mindful of the forest as well as the trees. Discrete influence operations that seem trivial by themselves may in the aggregate yield profound effects over time, shifting the environmental conditions and incentive structures that shape how actors think and act. Efforts to combat malign foreign influence must respond to acute events and slow-rolling processes that generate climate change. The most successful influence operations are those that run under the radar.